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US fails to realise tremendous opposition to war

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JOHN Ashcroft, the US Attorney-General said his mother had advised him not to keep his mouth open. This is because you never learn anything when your mouth is open, she had told him.

Similarly, a professor of communications at Harvard University had asked her students why God had given us two ears and one mouth? The answer - that we listen twice as much as we talk.

Sound advice that should be adhered to, but the Bush Administration does not appear to be listening. It is shouting and screaming its war chant and does not hear the rest of the world. It hears its own rhetoric and arguments on why the war in Iraq is inevitable.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell brought the drumbeat of war to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where sceptical political, business, religious and civil society leaders are gathered. Even friendly corporate leaders have accused Washington of arrogance, hypocrisy and neo colonialism.

Religious leaders, including Lord George Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, pointed out that the American insistence on military power had created a "credibility gap of trust in American politicians, and it's a very grave problem".

But Powell claimed that the US had "earned the trust of men, women and children around the world" and insisted that Washington was ready to act alone. He added that there was no real rush to judgment but clearly "time is running out".

Disregarding the democratic and majority view, he said: "We will not join a consensus if it compromises our principles... We will act even if others are not prepared to join us". It is, according to some observers at the Forum, "multilateralism a la America - which is unilateralism".

But Powell, making a case for the Bush Administration and setting the scene for the President's State of the Union address, says "multilateralism cannot be an excuse for inaction" and that the US will "not shrink from war if that is the only way to rid Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction".

If the Americans had listened and paid attention to discussions at the World Economic Forum, and talk in the corridors, restaurants and various other venues on the ski slopes of the Swiss Alps, the White House would have realised that there is tremendous opposition to war - and that includes from American businesses.

A poll conducted during a session on "The New Middle East in the Making" found that 81 per cent believed the war with Iraq was inevitable. Fifty-six per cent believed the war would drag on for six months and ignite urban warfare in Baghdad.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who spoke at the plenary session, articulated the thoughts and views of many, adding that the attack of Iraq will not contribute to dealing with terrorism.

Many agreed that the current focus on Iraq has sidelined the "war on terror" and that it would give rise to increased terrorism and a "cycle of violence", robbing generations in the region of peace, stability, progress and development.

One participant noted that there should be more leaders like Dr Mahathir who are not afraid to speak up and say their piece directly to the Americans and "to their face". But unfortunately not many are prepared to

do so for fear of US retaliation even though they disagree with the US plan of action.

The unilateral approach of the world's only superpower is not subscribed to by many in America and it sends hegemonic signals which make the rest of the world increasingly unstable. Kevin Clements, secretary-general of International Alert in the UK, says these tendencies when combined with the fact that the hegemon distorts the situation are even more disturbing.

Like Dr Mahathir, Clements, told the World Economic Forum "Iraq is a side show". But because of the US interest, it has been made into a "global issue". The US also "hijacked" the agenda of the World Economic Forum and misplaced the world's trust instead of building on it.

The question now is how to unbridle the bridled power of the US? Clements also asked where is Europe to tell the US that it is going in the wrong direction?

One European ambassador is quoted by the Financial Times as saying that "the real problem of the EU is that we never spoke out forcefully or early enough over Iraq".

The world's attention has been diverted from the "unfinished business of the war against terror" and a new diversion is being created - a tactic used by the White House quite often. S. Mohammad Hossein Adeli, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister argued that perhaps it is because of the "unfinished business" in Afghanistan that the Iraq issue has been created.

The region does not deserve another crisis. King Abdullah Hussein of Jordan said the region desperately needs peace, development and modernity and he too expressed concern that "we are being diverted onto another track" by the crisis in Iraq.

"Nowhere is an end to this (Israeli-Palestinian) conflict more important than in the region itself," he told the World Economic Forum. Despite its oil wealth, a recent UN report shows that over the last 20 years, per capita income in Arab countries has shrunk. It is now at a level just above that of Sub-Saharan Africa.

It is ironic that in a region that is rich in hydrocarbon resources, one in every five Arabs lives on less than US\$2 (RM7.60) a day. Fifteen per cent of the population is unemployed and productivity is declining.

For now, even as weapons inspectors say they have found no "smoking gun", the battle lines are drawn. King Abdullah said the mechanisms are in place for war and "We are a bit 'too little too late' to see a diplomatic solution".

"Let us hope that whatever happens between Iraq and the international community is as quick and painless as possible," he said.